

Voices in My Head: The Gary Burbank Story

Greg Hoard



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Greg Hoard's beguiling new biography following on the heels of the bestselling Joe, Rounding Third and Heading for Home is the story of the most fortunate man alive. Born Billy Purser in Memphis, this most fortunate man had only one job his entire life, entertaining. He began with the small audience of his perplexed family, expanded through his schoolyard, the army, and then torched a round of undermanned radio outposts in the Deep South.

In time, the funniest man in America nobody knows about became Gary Burbank, captivating one of the largest radio audiences in America. The Mouth That Ate America, he was called. The town cowlick . . . the guy from college who ate bugs for money. He was begat by Ernie Kovacs and Jonathan Winters, a kind of juiced up, downhome Garrison Keillor, if the place had been called Swamp Woebegone.

In truth, he defied description.

Until now, that is.

For Greg Hoard's novelistic Voices in My Head: The Gary Burbank Story lays out Burbank's beginnings in the blues and honky-tonk culture of mid-century Memphis, moving on to a rousing cast of characters including (but not limited to) Elvis Presley, Luis Aparicio, Whispering Bill Anderson, a monkey named Phyllis Chapman, various musicians and gospel singers, J.R. Ewing, and a crowd of the most happily deranged DJs in radio history.

What emerges is a hilarious, fantastical behind-the-scenes picture of a world that has all but disappeared; an airwave universe in which Burbank created a cast of characters so vivid and gleefully real, they populated their own deranged country.

For nearly a quarter of a century, these characters spilled out of Burbank's imagination (and that of his zany stable of writers) until they became household words all over the powerful WLW bandwidth: perpetually befuddled Gilbert Gnarley, bombastic Reverend Deuteronomy Skaggs, irascible Earl Pitts, transvestite anchorman Dan Buckles, Ranger Bob, and all their unholy offspring.

What emerges most plainly from Hoard's colorful story is the solid piece of remarkable craft that is Burbank's creation; himself. At once talebearer, skit-maker, provocateur, and social critic, Burbank was doing schtick before anybody around him including himself knew what he was doing. Then he kept on doing it, gaining ever more originality and control.

Possessed by the voices in his head, Burbank blew himself and them across the bandwidth, a nova of original comedy and comment. Hoard's careful recording of Burbank and his voices, imbedded in Hoard's own cinematic narrative, is one interconnected bit of exhilarating schtick.

All of it bears joyful testimony to Burbank's talent as an American original.

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Diana Keller:

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